DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 598 CS 215 786

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TITLE Personal Anthropology: Living and Writing in a Hypertextual Environment.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Autobiographies; *Computer Assisted Instruction; *Creative Writing; Cultural Context; *Hypermedia; Online Systems; *Personal Narratives; Poetry; *Self Concept; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Metacriticism; *Text Factors

ABSTRACT

A hypertext entitled "Reading the Map" comes from the exploration of an individual's own life. Observations, experiences, whatever comes to mind, become part of the text. This constant addition of information adds physically to the text, making a perceived move outward into the social. However, this additional information actually moves experience inward, so individuals can learn more about themselves. Added experiences are actually being peeled to reveal what is underneath. With an open hypertext like "Reading the Map," the experience is similar--though not exact--for each reader/writer, or used in the composition classroom, for each student. Further, a hypertext can tear away common and individual cultural influences to help in the reader/writer's search for an organic whole. In "Reading the Map," layers of meaning are torn away through a metacritical approach aimed at finding what is underneath a poem, for example. Every time a writer adds to the text in trying to explain its meaning, it increases the possibility of the text's ultimate reconstruction individually and culturally. The reader/writer should be able to change or modify any part of the hypertext, whether the words are personal or Shakespeare's--an idea that is a problem to many scholars. On one level, "Reading the Map" is personal history. On another it is collective because it allows people to react and respond, to actually alter the text. It is an open hypertext. (TB)

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ED 405 598

# Personal Anthropology: Living and Writing in a Hypertextual Environment

by Mark Metzler

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My hypertext – "Reading the Map" comes from an exploration of my own life. Observations, experiences, whatever comes to mind, become part of the text. This constant addition of information adds physically to the text, making a perceived move outward into the social. However, this additional information actually moves the experience inward, so I can learn more about myself. Added experiences are actually being peeled to reveal what is underneath. With an open hypertext like "Reading the Map," the experience is similar -- though not exact -- for each reader/writer. They just need a place to begin this inward journey. The more additions, the more places to start, the more places to begin this inward journey. This move inward is seemingly a solitary move, but it is a solitary move that is made up of all those personalities of Mark Metzler. It can be a move made up of the many personalities who take part, all moving forward as a multiple self.

A hypertext can tear away common and individual cultural influences to help in the reader/writer's search for an organic whole -- whether or not one exists.

In "Reading the Map," layers of meaning are torn away through a metacritical approach to find what is underlying the poems I wrote and continue to write (the metacriticism also is constantly torn away to reveal what is underneath and is made up of stories, other poems, conversations, many different types of writing). My search is one to define the nature of my personal being. The poems I created are personal myths that have a starting point that can be faced, understood, and then rebuilt, if need be. The challenge is to locate that starting point. If that point is within me, the process is relatively easy. Still more difficult (and infinitely more likely) is the prospect that my personal myths started well before I came into this world. This is the influence of culture. Cultural meaning and natural meaning (meaning what is at the core of a person's existence) do not co-exist in

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our society today. They have not co-existed for centuries within the context of civilization. Therefore, the only place the natural world can be explored -- and I mean what leads to this world as much as the natural world itself -- is within the context of each individual.

II

We constantly rebuild texts every day of the year with newspapers, books, magazines, traffic signs -- anything we read. Whenever we read something, we add our own experience. This is not a new thought. It has been bantered back and forth for centuries. There is no doubt that our experiences color our interpretations. (To be sure, this reader-response feeling is how I look at a good deal of my own work in "Reading the Map.") Further, there can be little doubt that culture has brought about our experiences. Building a personal hypertext helps to trace these thoughts through personal and cultural experience towards where these experiences began -- wherever that may be.

Our culture does not encourage personal exploration, but, instead, promotes the push outward into the social. The potential for learning about this inner world should be encouraged because when properly approached hypertext allows us to gain more insight into who we are, what it is we do, why we are here, and so on. This inward exploration, in my opinion, is the best use of hypertext.

Every time we add to the text in trying to explain its meaning, we increase the possibility of the text's ultimate reconstruction individually and culturally. The addition increases the possibility that the author will study the links -- throw out what is bad to that particular writer -- and then build a new meaning. With luck, this reconstruction will provide a better understanding of at least what is at the center of the original reader/writer, and, maybe, a better understanding of what is at the center of the particular culture.

I chose the interstate and other roads as the appropriate metaphor for "Reading the Map" because it best represented the common journey we take. At the same time, the metaphor allows for the exploration of individual experience through the exits and side roads each person follows. Beyond this, it is possible that the interstate I travel -- this long elongated circle I have used as metaphor-- is stacked upon other interstates, some that have yet to come about.

III

On one level "Reading the Map" is a personal history. The truths underlying the things I write about are similar enough, sometimes nearly exact, to the truths of the lives of others. There is nothing profound or monumental about this statement. It is the underlying principle that makes people react to various forms of communication -- letters, ads, telephone calls, television, radio, songs, fiction, non-fiction, television, the Internet or poetry. What are these truths? We hire people to tell us. We hire consultants and analysts to tell us. Is it one thing or more? Is there a lowest common denominator? It really is hard to say, and writers continually skirt the issue -- as I have done here. Any hypertext that lets people react and interact uncensored ( AN OPEN HYPERTEXT) -- can help us find these essential truths on a personal and then collective level.. This is the strength of hypertext -- to help in finding an individual organic whole (whether or not this is possible), and then moving from there to rebuild the cultural whole. This must start someplace -- it all begins with individual exploration.

The physical limits of exploration (outer world) have been exhausted. We have nothing to explore; we have nowhere to call new; we try to escape by leaving the city for the country -- by never leaving our homes except for the Internet. We are too far removed. Still, there are some essential, underlying truths somewhere (why else would we react the way we do to poetry). We should attempt to identify these truths. We should find what makes us what we are.

If we are to look at things we do in life, everything seems to be a reaction to something else. We put on clothes when we are hot and take them off because we are cold. We eat because we must to live. We explore because we are curious. We remember things because it keeps us from repeating mistakes. We believe things because it helps explain our existence. The vehicles that lead to these reactions are our senses: taste, touch, hearing sight, smell. Good poetry invokes many, if not all, of these senses. The reader then substitutes their sensory experience for that which the writer has presented. Even when the most skillful writers invoke the senses to create understanding -- like the beginning of Faulkner's "Barn Burning," the reader substitutes their own specific experience. It is what happens. Within cultures, most certainly, and perhaps even through humankind, sensory experience is consistent, though not exact. Beyond sensory experience we find thought. It is thought, then decision, that leads to our reaction to the things brought to us by sensory experience. The readers/writers of hypertext are doing the one thing we have consistenly done as a society -- reacted. Hypertext simply encourages the tangible expression of that reaction by making the links explicit.

IV

Of course, encouraging readers/writers to react to text in a way that seems natural, allows those readers/writers to change existing text. I do not own the poems in "Reading the Map." They belong to each reader/writer at the time they are read and reacted to. They may well be my poems again when I reconstruct them, even if the reconstruction uses the same language as the original. The process of rebuilding poems is nearly perpetual for each reader/writer, and each time the poem is rebuilt in the mind of the reader/writer the poem belongs to that reader/writer.. Hypertext allows for the explicit physical representation of the changed text, even if the poem does not change physically. It doesn't matter if the words are different. Therefore, a hypertext -- like a book -- continues to change each time it is visited. The words used in a text represent meaning at that particular point in time.

Meaning is personal. This personal meaning when articulated in a hypertext becomes a starting point for the new reader/writer's personal anthropology. At that point, it is the center of all texts. Changing centers come from interactions with the text, creating a web of understanding anyone can tap into anytime. Any text exists as complete only for a moment because people are constantly deconstructing and then reconstructing the work, whatever work that might be at a particular time. In "Reading the Map" each interaction, each addition -- no matter how small -- changes the entire work. It is the same with life.

V

Most people who write hypertexts write closed hypertexts. This allows the reader to follow ideas only as far as the original author's imagination allows. Immediacy is taken away. The spontaneity that makes up the best poetry, at least according to Basho, is killed. Each successive reader is cheated because they won't have the benefit of the added information to help spark their own ideas. In an open hypertext, the spontaneity remains; the exploration continues.

The reader/writer should be able to change or modify any part of the hypertext -- whether the words are mine or Shakespeare's. This idea is a problem to many scholars. Clearly, I am talking about changing text, changing Frost, Yeats, Austen. But I believe that the words should be changed. It is no more than a tangible representation of what we already do. To illustrate my point, think about Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." My guess is that when a reader looks at the poem and sees the two roads, these roads take on a personal significance to the reader. And when Frost writes that he has taken the road "less traveled by," the reader thinks of the decisions of his or her life. I even think of links I haven't followed. I could rewrite the poem -- "The Link Not Taken." Change the words? Why not? We do it in our heads -- why not on paper? Why not in the computer? Words belong to everyone.

Some say that hypertexts like mine will lead to the death of books. That sort of argument is short-sighted. My hypertext includes a poem called the Second Coming. The poem is examined through the biblical Second Coming, the poem "The Second Coming" by Yeats and talks about the Second Coming of Ryne Sandberg and the Chicago Cubs. Another logical move is the "Chicago" poems of Carl Sandburg ("Chicago" is already included in "Reading the Map"). Any of these subjects could focus any reader on a vast selection of books. Those books could be included as part of the text of shown as reference material. Any of these subjects could stimulate long teaching essays and they do. What I am saying is that hypertext, if done correctly, will push people toward books, toward questioning and toward critical thinking.

VI

Truth and reality are too subjective to be defined broadly in any sort of cultural sense; these words, these concepts can only be defined individually, which is what I'm trying to do with "Reading the Map." I've attempted to tear away layers of meaning like they were old wallpaper to find what was really underneath. To do this, I've added to the size of the piece and at the same time, I hope, narrowed the meaning. I've attempted to reach toward truth and reality on an individual basis and then open the way for others to travel a similar path.

A hypertext like "Reading the Map" can help me understand what I'm about; it can make me more productive because I will be able to concentrate on things in my life that are most important; it can make me more creative because it encourages me to follow paths to their conclusion -- whatever that conclusion might be.

Sometimes these personal adventures lead to a dead end -- a place where I can't explore any further at this time. Maybe later. What matters to me is that I have taken the journey. I have tried to find something out about myself. Now others can find out more about themselves.

Everything that happens in the world is part of our experience, and whether or not we recognize or even realize that, our open hypertext becomes part of Jung's universal unconscious. Everything is part of everyone's experience. By someone adding to this mix, the next person might find something that better explains what they are doing, that helps them move on to profound thoughts, that helps them in some way better understand the type of person they are, and, eventually, the type of world in which we live. Hypertext tears down complexity, instead of adding to that complexity. We should follow this link, this path, this road.... to first understand ourselves as individuals and then, hopefully, to understand ourselves as a culture.

As a tool in the classroom, hypertext can be used imaginatively by creative writing and composition students, both as individual and group projects.